

Alternate route, same destination: all highly qualified teachers

By Catherine Kearney
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Last month, Congress passed legislation defining “highly qualified” to include teachers pursuing their credential through an alternative certification program. The legislation comes on the heels of a September ruling by the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals reversing the designation of “highly qualified” for teachers going through alternative certification programs, following the controversial lawsuit by the advocacy group Public Advocates. Before Congress’ recent action, the ruling had the potential to cut off a critical pathway to teaching for many professionals, as well as an important pipeline of effective teachers for California school districts.

At the cornerstone of this debate is whether we should accept the strictest interpretation of what it means to be a “highly qualified” teacher, which according to Public Advocates and the recent U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decision, solely applies to teachers who pursued their credential through a traditional preparation program. A traditional program differs from an alternate route program in that alternative route programs provide skilled professionals with quicker access to the classroom, coupled with concurrent coursework and intensive coaching and support.

The California Teacher Corps, the statewide organization representing California’s alternative route to certification programs, disagrees, as did Congress. The legislation is a bold step in reaffirming the validity of multiple pathways into the classroom for prospective teachers, including an alternative pathway, all of which produce highly qualified teachers for our students.

Teachers going through alternative route to certification programs are often second-career professionals, and other content experts, who want to serve their community and teach in the public schools in greatest need, including hard-to-staff and high-poverty schools. They include former scientists, child advocates, lawyers and federal prosecutors, military men and women, as well as other individuals who might not have otherwise entered the classroom if not for this pathway, but who are all seeking to give of their time and talents to better educate California’s students. Our programs attract career changers, under-represented minorities, and homegrown teachers for high-need rural communities, as well as content experts to fill fields with a critical shortage of qualified teachers, such as math, science and special education, areas in which our state falls behind.

All of these professionals, even before they set foot into the classroom, must pass a rigorous subject-matter competency test and are required to complete an equivalent of a full semester’s worth, or 160 hours of instruction, including pedagogy, classroom management, and lesson design. Additionally, coursework and instruction continue concurrent to teaching in the classroom. Most importantly, our teachers also receive day-to-day mentorship and coaching for up to two years by veteran educators.

Despite these valuable skills and the real-world experiences these teachers bring with them, as well as rigorous preparation programs, there are those who continue to take an archaic interpretation as to whether they are “highly qualified.”

Recruiting for low-income districts

They also raise concern over the “disproportionate” concentration of our teachers in high-need, high-poverty schools, all of which serve the very students who are in most need of the best and brightest teachers in their classrooms.

We couldn’t agree more, and that is why we *proactively* recruit and place our teachers in these underserved communities. We know that our teachers, with their maturity, real-world experience, content expertise, and understanding of the community in which they teach, are often the best suited to serve in high-need schools and meet the diverse needs of their students.

In fact, when principals and school districts are asked to weigh in, more than 90 percent rank teachers from alternative route to certification programs as good or better than teachers from traditional programs, according to a 2009 survey commissioned by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC). More importantly, nearly 95 percent of principals would again hire additional teachers from alternate route programs.

Over the last six years, alternative route to certification programs have placed more than 55,000 highly skilled teachers in California public schools. This pathway has been used to recruit much-needed math and science professionals into the teaching profession, retrain and shift over 1,500 pink-slipped teachers into the high-need field of special education, assist rural school districts in recruiting and retaining homegrown talent, and place a higher percentage of under-represented minorities in the classroom than are currently teaching within the broader California school system.

Alternative route to certification programs have historically met the varying needs of California public schools, and while doing so have recruited and placed “highly qualified” teachers in classrooms across the state. After all, would you tell Colin Powell that he was not highly qualified to teach civics or history, Steven Spielberg to teach drama or film, or astronaut Sally Ride to teach science just because they have not gone through a traditional preparation program? As we work together to reform the K-12 public education system, we must move past our old assumptions as to what makes an effective teacher and keep the pipeline open to include talented professionals who want to serve the students who need them the most.

[The California Teacher Corps](#) is the statewide organization representing California’s alternative route to certification programs. A nonprofit established in 2009, the Teacher Corps has set the goal to place 100,000 highly qualified teachers in California’s communities by 2020. California Teacher Corps membership trains second-career teachers and others committed to working in hard-to-staff schools, who have deep subject-area expertise and who remain in the teaching profession.

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